

Non-Academic Vocabulary Used by Students in Essay Writing

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the use of non-academic vocabulary in essay writing by seventh-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong. This research employed a descriptive qualitative method with 18 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through a writing test in which students were asked to write essays based on given topics. The findings revealed that the most frequently used non-academic vocabulary was personal pronouns, followed by imprecise words, contractions, slang, abbreviations, and clichés. The use of non-academic vocabulary indicates students' lack of understanding of academic writing conventions. Therefore, improving students' awareness of appropriate academic vocabulary is essential to enhance their writing quality.

Keywords: academic writing, writing, essay, non-academic vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the essential skills in language learning and is often considered the most complex among the four basic language skills. In the process of writing, students are required not only to generate ideas but also to organize them into coherent and meaningful texts. This involves several stages, including selecting a topic, developing supporting ideas, organizing content, applying grammatical rules, and revising the written work. These processes require critical thinking and careful consideration, which make writing a challenging skill for many students.

In addition to these challenges, the use of appropriate vocabulary plays a crucial role in determining the quality of writing. Choosing suitable words can help writers convey their ideas clearly and convince readers of the importance of their work. On the other hand, unclear, ambiguous, or incorrect word choices may lead to misunderstanding and reduce the credibility of the writing. In academic contexts, not all vocabulary used in everyday communication is appropriate. Informal expressions, commonly used in spoken language, are often unsuitable for academic writing, which requires a more formal and precise style. Vocabulary must be emphasized in the English learning process in the classroom so that the improvement of students' English proficiency becomes more structured (wael et al. 2024).

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in language learning, particularly in writing. It is not only a matter of knowing word meanings but also understanding how to use words appropriately in different contexts. As stated by Nation (2001), “vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, and knowledge of the world enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use.” This indicates that vocabulary mastery is closely related to students’ ability to produce effective writing.

Academic writing is commonly used in educational settings such as high school and university, and it differs significantly from personal or creative writing. As stated by Oshima and Hogue (2007), “academic writing is the kind of writing used in high school and college classes.” This type of writing requires students to avoid informal features such as slang and contractions, as well as to adopt a structured and formal approach. Furthermore, Irvin (2010) explains that “academic writing is always a form of evaluation that asks you to demonstrate knowledge and show proficiency with certain disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting, and presenting.” This indicates that students are expected to fully understand and apply academic writing conventions.

In addition, academic writing requires specific conventions that distinguish it from everyday communication. Hyland (2009) states that “academic writing is shaped by the need to present arguments in ways that are persuasive, structured, and appropriate to a particular academic community.” This means that students must be aware not only of grammar but also of appropriate vocabulary use in order to meet academic expectations.

However, despite these expectations, students still often make errors in their writing, including the use of non-academic vocabulary. These errors may seem minor but can have a significant impact on the quality of academic texts. The use of informal vocabulary in academic writing may become a habit if it is not addressed properly, which can reduce the clarity, formality, and effectiveness of students’ essays.

Based on this issue, this study focuses on analyzing the use of non-academic vocabulary in students’ essay writing, particularly among seventh-semester students of the English Education Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong. The objective of this research is to identify and analyze the types of non-academic vocabulary used by students in their essays. The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study can enhance students’ understanding of appropriate vocabulary use in academic writing. Practically, it can serve as a reference for students and lecturers in improving writing instruction and preventing common errors in academic writing.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research method to analyze the use of non-academic vocabulary in students’ essay writing. The research design used was descriptive qualitative, which aims to describe phenomena systematically and factually without involving statistical calculations. According to Moleong (2011:11), descriptive qualitative research focuses on describing data in the form of words and sentences rather than numerical data. Therefore, this approach was considered appropriate for identifying and explaining the types of non-academic vocabulary used by students.

The research was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong, focusing on seventh-semester students of the English Education Program. The participants consisted of 18 students selected through purposive sampling. The criteria for selecting the participants included: (1) students who were in the seventh semester, (2) students who had passed the Advanced Writing course, and (3) students who obtained a minimum grade of B in the course. These criteria were applied to ensure that the participants had sufficient background knowledge in academic writing.

The instrument used in this research was a writing test. The test required students to write an essay based on several given topics. As stated by Philips (1979:1-2), a test is a tool used to obtain data about specific characteristics of individuals or groups. In this study, the writing test was used to collect authentic data regarding students' use of vocabulary in academic writing. The data were collected by asking students to write essays based on three selected topics: (1) Are Video Games Bad for Kids?, (2) Education is the Single Most Important Factor in the Development of a Country. Do You Agree?, and (3) The Importance of Mental Health for Teenagers. The students were given a specific time to complete their essays. After all essays were collected, they were used as the primary data for analysis.

The data analysis was conducted through several steps. First, the researcher read all students' essays carefully. Second, the researcher identified and marked non-academic vocabulary using color coding for each category: personal pronouns, imprecise words, slang, contractions, abbreviations, and clichés. Third, the identified vocabulary was classified into those categories. Fourth, the frequency of each type was counted to determine the most dominant forms. Finally, the data were interpreted descriptively in the form of explanations to present the findings clearly. This procedure enabled the researcher to identify patterns of non-academic vocabulary use in students' essay writing and to draw conclusions based on the results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Types of Non-Academic Vocabulary

The findings show that students used various types of non-academic vocabulary in their essays. The frequency of usage is as follows:

1. Personal Pronouns

The findings revealed that personal pronouns were the most frequently used type of non-academic vocabulary in students' essays. From 18 participants, various forms of personal pronouns were identified, including first person (*I, we*), second person (*you*), and third person (*they*). These pronouns were used both as subjects and objects, indicating students' tendency to express ideas subjectively rather than objectively.

The frequent use of personal pronouns in students' essays reflects a tendency toward subjective expression. In academic writing, objectivity is highly valued. According to Hyland (2004), "academic writing typically involves presenting arguments in an impersonal and objective manner to enhance credibility." Therefore, the use of personal pronouns may weaken the academic tone of students' writing.

For instance, Participant 12 wrote, "*But for me videogames is really bad for kids.*" This sentence shows the use of the personal pronoun *me* to express the writer's opinion, which should be avoided in academic writing. Similarly, Participant 3 used "*I think education is important for a country to grow,*" which reflects a subjective tone. In academic contexts, such expressions should be replaced with more formal alternatives, such as "*The writer considers...*" or by directly stating the argument without personal reference. Another example was found in Participant 7's sentence, where the pronoun *they* was used ambiguously to refer to mental health problems. This indicates that personal pronouns not only reduce formality but may also cause ambiguity in meaning.

These findings suggest that students are still influenced by spoken language habits when writing essays. The dominance of personal pronouns indicates a lack of awareness of academic writing conventions, which emphasize objectivity and impersonality.

Table 1. Personal Pronouns Used in Essay

Number	Person	Personal pronoun
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		Subject	Object
Singular	1 st	I	Me
	2 nd	You	You
	3 rd	He, She, It	It
Plural	1 st	We	Us
	3 rd	They	Them

2. Imprecise Words

The second most frequent type of non-academic vocabulary found in students' essays was imprecise words. These include vague nouns (things, ways), general verbs (make, get, take), and unclear quantifiers (a lot, lots of). The use of imprecise words indicates that students may have limited vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2001) emphasizes that "a rich vocabulary allows learners to express more precise meanings and to communicate more effectively." Without sufficient vocabulary, students tend to rely on general words, which reduce the clarity of their ideas.

For example, Participant 5 wrote, "But playing video games make confused between reality and fantasy conditions, but in the real world games also help students learn English." This sentence contains several imprecise words such as but (repeated), make, and help, which reduce clarity and precision. These words could be replaced with more formal alternatives such as however, create, and assist.

Another example was found in Participant 6's sentence: "If the kids join the competition and win, they earn a lot." The phrase a lot is unclear because it does not specify what is being earned, while the verb join could be replaced with a more formal expression such as participate in or sign up for. These findings indicate that students have limited vocabulary range and tend to rely on general or vague expressions. This lack of precision can reduce the clarity and effectiveness of academic writing.

Table 2. Imprecise Words Used in Essay

Imprecise Words				
Noun	Verb	Conjunction	Adverb	Adjective
Ways	Know	But	Some	Like
Thing	Take	So	So that	-
Habit thing	Get	-	A lot	-
Said rude	Talk	-	Quite a lot of	-
Something like that	Gives	-	Usually a lot	-
-	Help	-	Lots of	-
-	See	-	-	-
-	Say	-	-	-
-	Make	-	-	-
-	Said	-	-	-
-	Try	-	-	-
-	Talking	-	-	-
-	Think	-	-	-
-	Join	-	-	-

3. Contractions

Table 3. Contractions Used in Essay

Contractions		
Verb 'to be'	Verb 'to do'	Spoken Language
It's	Don't	Wanna
Isn't	Didn't	-
You're	Doesn't	-
That's	-	-
There's	-	-
They're	-	-
Here's	-	-

The use of contractions was also identified in several students' essays. Common contractions found include it's, don't, didn't, and informal spoken forms such as wanna. For instance, Participant 13 wrote, "And it's the one media that turns screen time into activity time." Similarly, Participant 18 wrote, "It's automatically make you forget to everything you wanna do." These examples show the use of shortened forms that are typical in spoken language but inappropriate in formal academic writing.

Contractions should be written in their full forms, such as it is and want to, to maintain formality. Interestingly, the data also showed that some participants did not use contractions at all, indicating that they may already understand the rules of academic writing. Overall, the presence of contractions reflects inconsistency in students' understanding of formal writing conventions.

4. Slang

Table 4. Slang Words Used in Essay

Slang
Look up
Pretty annoying
Looking for
Make friends
Turns out
Spending time
Look at
Blowing off steam

Another type of non-academic vocabulary identified in this study is slang, including informal phrases and expressions such as spending time, look at, make friends, and blowing off steam. For example, Participant 9 wrote, "Their happiness includes spending time with friends." The phrase spending time is considered informal and could be replaced with socializing. Similarly, Participant 17 used the phrase "look at" in "parents have to look at what their child do," which is more appropriate in spoken language than in academic writing.

The use of slang indicates that students are still influenced by conversational language. Although these expressions may be understandable, they reduce the level of formality required in academic essays.

5. Abbreviations

Table 5. Abbreviation Used in Essay

Short Form of Words	
Initialism	Shortening
TV	etc.
AOV	o/
COC	Min
-	'till

The study also found the use of abbreviations or short forms of words, such as TV, etc., min, and o/. These forms are typically used in informal writing and are not appropriate in academic contexts. For instance, Participant 1 wrote “TV” instead of television, while Participant 12 used “min” and “o/” instead of minus and or plus. These shortened forms may reduce clarity and are considered non-standard in formal writing. However, the findings show that many participants did not use abbreviations, suggesting that some students already understand the need for formal vocabulary in academic writing.

6. Clichés

The least frequently used type of non-academic vocabulary was clichés. Only a few instances were found, such as the expression “English is an international language.” For example, Participant 6 used this phrase, which is widely known and often repeated in many texts. Although the statement is true, it does not add specific or meaningful information to the essay. Clichés are considered weak expressions in academic writing because they lack originality and specificity. In this case, the sentence could be omitted without affecting the overall meaning of the paragraph.

Table 6. Clichés Used in Essay

Clichés
English is an international language

The findings indicate that students still face difficulties in applying appropriate academic vocabulary in essay writing. The most dominant issue is the use of personal pronouns, particularly by Participant 18, who frequently used you to describe general situations. This indicates that students tend to write as if they are speaking directly to the reader, which reflects spoken language influence. In terms of imprecise words, Participant 4 showed the highest frequency, using vague expressions such as gives and impact. This suggests that students have limited vocabulary mastery and tend to rely on general words instead of more specific academic terms.

Furthermore, the use of contractions was inconsistent. While some students frequently used contractions, others avoided them completely. This indicates varying levels of understanding of academic writing conventions among students. On the other hand, slang, abbreviations, and clichés were less frequently used. This suggests that most students have some awareness of formal writing, although they have not fully mastered it.

Additionally, the researcher found the use of possessive pronouns such as my, our, their, and you. In some cases, these pronouns caused ambiguity. For example, Participant 17 used they’re without clear reference, which made the sentence unclear. This indicates that students

need to improve not only formality but also clarity in writing. Overall, these findings indicate that students' writing is still influenced by informal language and spoken communication habits. Therefore, it is important for teachers to provide explicit instruction on academic vocabulary and encourage students to practice formal writing consistently.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights a fundamental gap between students' writing practices and the expectations of academic writing. Although students are already at an advanced level of study, their essays still reflect a strong influence of informal and spoken language, particularly through the dominant use of personal pronouns and imprecise vocabulary. This pattern suggests that the issue is not merely about isolated vocabulary choices, but rather a deeper lack of awareness regarding the principles of formality, objectivity, and precision in academic discourse.

The findings also reveal that while some features such as abbreviations, slang, and clichés appear less frequently, their presence indicates that students have not yet fully internalized academic writing conventions. More importantly, the use of vague expressions and ambiguous pronouns demonstrates that students' writing may not effectively communicate ideas with clarity and accuracy, which are essential in academic contexts.

These results underline the importance of explicitly teaching academic vocabulary and writing conventions, rather than assuming that students will acquire them naturally through exposure. Without targeted instruction and consistent practice, students are likely to continue transferring informal language habits into academic tasks.

Therefore, this study contributes to the understanding that improving students' writing quality requires a focused emphasis on vocabulary precision, clarity, and formality. By addressing these aspects, educators can better support students in developing writing that is not only grammatically correct but also academically appropriate and effective in conveying ideas.

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